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Staying Inspired in Difficult Times

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New and Noteworthy: Staying Inspired in Difficult Times

Jennifer A. Bartlett

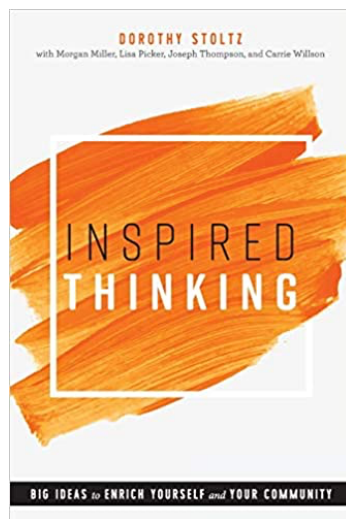
A Library is a place that is a repository of, and gives every citizen equal access to, information. That includes health information. And mental health information. It's a community space. It's a place of safety, a haven from the world. It's a place with librarians in it. What the libraries of the future will be like is something we should be imagining now.

-- Neil Gaiman

In the midst of challenging times and rapid change it can be difficult to maintain a sense of normalcy and commitment. How do we stay inspired and keep going day to day? How can we continue to be fully present for not only our family, friends, colleagues, and library patrons, but most importantly, ourselves? Does anything we do as librarians really make a difference?

In 2013, author Neil Gaiman delivered a lecture to the Reading Agency, a British literacy charity, entitled "Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming."¹ His speech is a love letter to the libraries he knew as a child and the librarians who made the world of literature and ideas freely available to him. Literacy, reading, and access to information are indispensable for a free and strong society, and thus so is advocacy for the institutions and professionals who support them.

Now more than ever, we can all use some inspiring reading. For this "New and Noteworthy" column, I suggest a few titles that urge us to renew our commitment to our profession and the important work our libraries do in our communities.

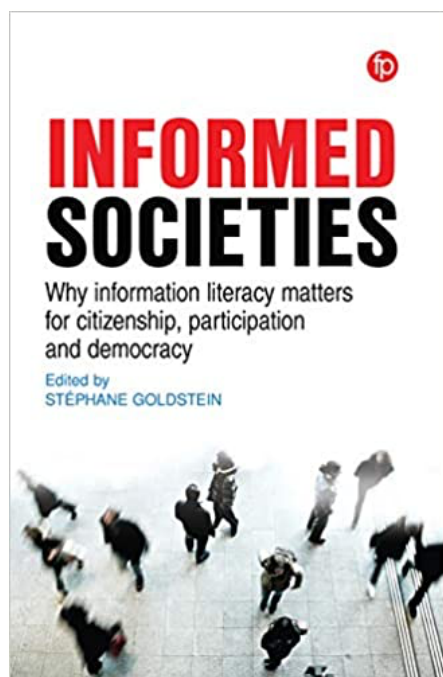


*Inspired Thinking: Big Ideas to Enrich Yourself and Your Community*² is an uplifting and optimistic book written by a group of motivated, experienced public library leaders who view libraries as a driver of innovation and creativity. The "big ideas" featured in this entertaining and passionate book include key concepts such as unity, joy, respect, and curiosity, and begins with a discussion of libraries' historical role in advancing human achievement and culture. As the authors state, "few in today's world are better suited than a librarian [and library staff] to share

ideas to help people improve their skills at living and to recognize their own potential” (pp. 111-112).

The book is divided into four sections: Cultivating Ideas, Building Bridges to Big Ideas, Implementing Ideas, and Finding the Light Within Ideas. Each section features several chapters, each beginning with a motivational quote from great figures in history such as Benjamin Franklin, Marie Curie, and Helen Keller. A main idea throughout the book is that libraries have and can continue to serve as an educational and cultural force in their communities, and can promote values including honesty, humor, helpfulness, curiosity, and discipline, among others.

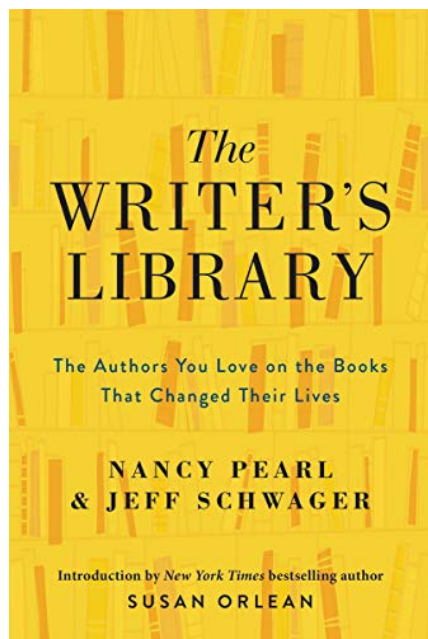
Stoltz, a director for community engagement at Carroll County (Maryland) Public Library, is also the author of *Inspired Collaboration: Ideas for Discovering and Applying Your Potential* (ALA Editions, 2016).



While there are already scores of books on information literacy-related topics, *Informed Societies: Why Information Literacy Matters for Citizenship, Participation and Democracy*³ is a welcome and useful addition: an outstanding collection of multidisciplinary essays that shed light on how libraries and librarians are key players in fostering critical thinking and discernment despite the continuing deluge of information coming from a seemingly limitless number of sources. As editor Stéphanie Goldstein states in the introduction, “...given that the quality, the reliability and the veracity of information varies hugely, information literacy is also about developing the capacity and confidence to make judgements about information, to adopt healthily critical approaches towards it, to understand its purpose, its provenance and the way that it is mediated. And on that basis, to challenge it and offer alternative narratives – on the understanding that these too are founded on rational, well-informed discourse.”

The book’s 11 chapters each offer a different facet of the significance of information literacy viewed from various professional perspectives. Chapter One offers an overview of the relationship among various types of literacies including digital, information, media, and political and how a basic appreciation of all these is crucial for a democratic society to thrive.

Subsequent chapters discuss topics including information literacy and national policy making, the relationship between “intellectual empathy” and information literacy education, and the political and psychological impact of the “post-truth” world. Of particular interest is Chapter Nine, “Libraries and Democracy: Complementarity in a Regime of Truth,” in which authors Hilary Yerbury and Maureen Henninger discuss the traditional role of libraries in providing fair and equitable information and the challenges that university and public libraries now face in serving their users.



How does the practice of reading inform the life of a writer? Why do you read, and how does reading help you write? These are the questions that sparked the idea behind this inspirational book that brings together 23 well-known authors talking about the books that fed (and continue to feed) their writing lives.

In *The Writer's Library: The Authors You Love on the Books That Changed Their Lives*,⁴ well-known librarian Nancy Pearl and playwright Jeff Schwager interview over twenty notable authors including Jennifer Egan, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Jonathan Lethem, T.C. Boyle, Luis Alberto Urrea, Michael Chabon, and Russell Banks. Presented in a question and answer format, each chapter gives the impression that the reader is listening in on a particularly well-informed conversation between two friends who love literature and are eager to recommend new books to each other. Topics range from favorite authors to key books to bookstores to libraries and how these experiences inspired these writers in the pursuit of their craft.

With a foreword by Susan Orlean (author of 2018's *The Library Book*),⁵ this book also features a black and white line drawing, brief biography, and recommended reading of each featured writer.

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Notes

¹ Neil Gaiman. "Why Our Future Depends on Libraries, Reading and Daydreaming," *The View from the Cheap Seats: Selected Nonfiction* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), pp. 5-15.

² Dorothy Stoltz, Morgan Miller, Lisa Picker, Joseph Thompson, and Carrie Wilson. *Inspired Thinking: Big Ideas to Enrich Yourself and Your Community* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2020).

³ Goldstein, Stéphane, ed. *Informed Societies: Why Information Literacy Matters for Citizenship, Participation and Democracy* (London: Facet Publishing, 2020).

⁴ Nancy Pearl and Jeff Schwager. *The Writer's Library: The Authors You Love on the Books That Changed Their Lives* (New York: HarperOne, 2020).

⁵ Susan Orlean. *The Library Book* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018).